Chapter Three

Mithila, Maithili and Maithil: the *Field* in Historical Context[78]

Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it can not possibly evolve form 'nature' of things

Barthes (1989:110)

There are a few recurrent motifs often found in the history of Mithila. Firstly, it has a history largely based on conjectures and inferences. Especially the history of ancient Mithila, in the Vedic period, and a huge part of medieval too, epitomize the distinction of historiography on Mithila. The traditional texts of the *Vedas*, the *Brahmanas*, *Smritis*, and *Jatakas* (Buddhist texts) are major sources to decipher the historical that is invariably entangled with mythical. Secondly, it has a humble history, war and conquest are not its central preoccupation, which is a regular feature in history more often than not. Though there are instances of aggression on the part of Mithila's kingship, they are not of the kind that could be an attraction in the royal annals. The kings are mostly men of letters with scholarly, philosophical, literary,

[78] It is important to reset the notion of history at the outset of this discussion. Here history does not mean what Positivistic Historiography suggests of the craft. History of a cultural region is enmeshed in mythology and is located in the domain of tradition. Hence, the following discussions, based on the perusal of historical writings and some first hand observations does not intend to present a perfect historical account. It rather is an endeavor to make sense of what the region was and how has it passed through certain historically recorded as well as unrecorded milieu. Besides, the present account aims at certain questions, which are generally considered sacrilegious, when it come to discuss an overly glorified traditional-cultural region.

All maps, used in this chapter, are downloaded from http://cc.1asphost.com/mithila/map_mithila.asp

poetic engagements. Instances of aggression by kings in Mithila tell tales of their self-defeating escape in many cases. History has it that any bid at carving out a politically sovereign Mithila eventuated into debacle for the entire dynasty. The third point is a gateway to a larger discussion on the idea of Mithila as a politico-cultural region and Maithili as its language. It is about the indefinite landmarks shifting throughout the history of Mithila, and definite speech-marks in the socio-cultural region called Mithila. It invites to ponder upon the modern debates on Mithila and Maithili whereby certain conflicting streams of thoughts emerge.

Upendra Thakur, one of the earliest historians writing on ancient Mithila, opens with a remark that vouches for these recurrent themes. To quote, "There are few regions of India possessing an ancient civilization, about which we have less definite historical information than the region north of the Ganges, variously known as Videha, Tirubhukti, or (after the name of its capital) Mithila…its history does not center around feats of arms, but around courts given to higher pursuits of learning" (1956: 1).

This chapter would delve into these recurrent motifs in historiography to underline the socio-cultural arrangements in Mithila. The traces of the Vedic age would appear only as remnant of past in post-Vedic age of *Brahmanas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Buddhist* and *Jain*. The key epochs under consideration in this chapter would belong to the post-Vedic era, reason being the tangible historicity of the latter. It would be to the extent of the Muslim rules. The abiding concern is not to present a chronological details of the war and conquest, though the chapter would utilize the instances of the changes in command to only evaluate the impact on society.

Mithila: ***as it were***

In the landscape of civilization, Mithila was not called Mithila to begin with. It was rather called Videha, with the earliest reference to in the *Satpatha Brahmana* (1000-600 B.C.). If we go by the references to it in traditional text such as *Brihad-Vishnu Purana*, there were twelve names of Mithila. All these names are 'descriptive epithets'. Out of these, only three gains in significance. First being that Videha lost its currency of usage in medieval times. Tirubhukti was the popular name of the region in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. Even in Grierson's work on the languages of Bihar, there are constant references to Tirhut (a derivative of Tirubhukti). "The use of the appellation 'Mithila' along with 'Tirubhukti or Tirhut' for the whole country is

comparatively very late- from about the time of the installation of the Karnata dynasty in 1097 A.D" (Mishra 1979: 12).

On the other hand, however, there are multiple versions of stories to suggest the antiquity of the term Mithila. To settle with one: Nimi, the son of an Ayodhya king Manu, came to this part of earth which was loftily termed 'land of sacrifices' Videha, and his son Mithi built a city named after him as Mithila. Mithi, as the builder of the city earned the epithet Janaka and the city Mithila acquired the status of capital town of Videha. Another version is that Mithi was the name of a sage after whom the region was called Mithila (Jha 1958).

The name Janaka is a point of polysemy in the history of ancient Mithila. It appears like an epithet earned by all those who created something. It is a family name for a creator. Thus, the father of Sita, the king named Siradhwaja bears the suffix 'Janaka'. This is albeit not the Janaka who is hailed, in texts and also routine talks in Mithila, as a philosopher-king of Mithila. The latter was Krti Janaka, a close friend of the renowned philosopher Yajnavalkya. Janak, the father of the protagonist Sita of the epic Ramayana, is often confused with Janak - the king philosopher. But the common between them is that they are both located in a mythological context rather than in historical, in modern sense of historiography. Historians on Mithila resort to inferences from the traditional texts to make sense of the region and its people in olden times. It helps while it also obscures many dimensions. Hence, it is only

imperative to be comfortable with polysamous and doubtful understandings of Mithila. This would be how it is possible to figure out the ironies and paradoxes implicit in the idea of Mithila and Maithili. Unless the implicit paradoxes are underscored, any historical understanding of Mithila would be bound to wishful glorification of the land and its people[79].

Thus, on one hand historians acknowledge the geographical map of Mithila and on the other underline the dynamic aspect of its geography[80]. Rivers and mountains are eternal landmarks in locating Mithila in posterity, if not history. Between 25' 28'' and 26' 52'' North latitude, and between 84' 56'' and 86' 46'' east longitude exists Mithila, bounded by the Himalaya in the north, and in the east, south and west by the rivers Kosi (Kausiki), Ganga and Gandaki respectively (Thakur 1956, Mishra 1979, Jha 1958, Burghart 1993). A footnote by Thakur, however, adds to uncertainty and augments the possibility of shifting landmarks of Mithila. It locates the Gangasagar, the bay where the Ganga merges into the sea, and is presently located near the diamond harbor in Calcutta, in Mithila. To quote,

"In ancient times, the sea extended up to the Himalaya. On account of constant siltation, Gangasagara has been shifting south-eastward. The Gangasagara referred to here (in Vishnu Purana and Shrimadbhagvat) might be somewhere near Mithila, in her south-east, in Munger or Bhagalpur or Rajmahal" (1956: 6).

Similarly, shifting boundaries, in accordance with geographical-natural landmarks, is often associated with the changing course of the river Kosi. Mishra attributes changes in the eastern boundary of Mithila to it (1979: 8)[81]. Little wonder, on account of shifting course of the three rivers, Jha suggests, almost the same, "it is difficult to fix

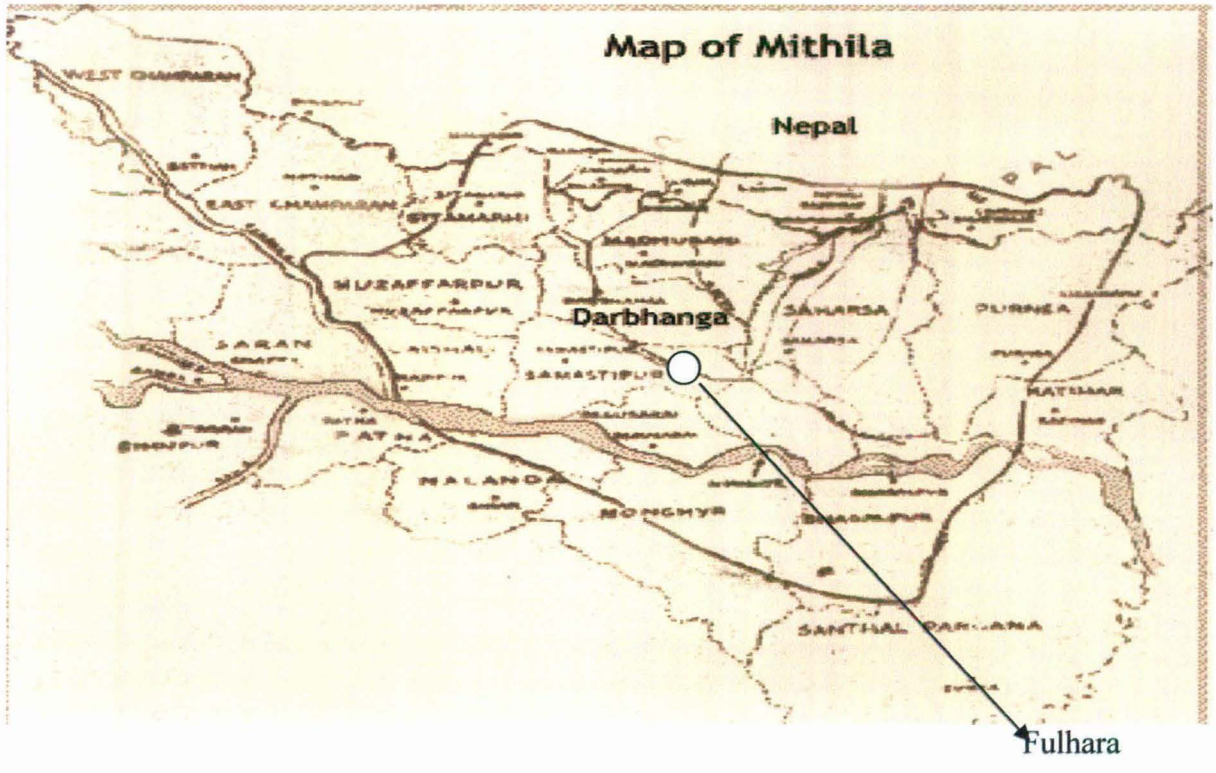
---

[79] Invariably every piece of reflection, scholarly or otherwise, on Mithila underpins an overtone of glorification of Mithila, Maithili, and Maithil (who inhabit Mithila). While there is no denial of the sense of pride in Mithila being seat of scholarship, art and religion, there is ample scope of critical approach to understanding Mithila too. In many personal conversations I found that scholars from Mithila do not tolerate anybody telling them that Mithila has a myth, because for them myth is bland lie and they would like to say that myth of Mithila is less mythical than historical. Prof. Ramdev Jha, a scholar of Maithili language, vehemently refused to hear of myth in Maithil history.

[80] Despite the uncertainty of geographical boundaries of Mithila that texts suggest there has been a recent tendency amongst Maithil scholars to fix the boundary on the latest unofficially drawn political map.

[81] The recent flood in Kosi river did not affect the conventional area of Mithila. It rather moved toward the Purnea side of it and caught everybody in executive and governance unawares. A newspaper reports 'Kosi slides eastward, wreaks havoc' in Indian Express, Tuesday 26th August, 2008. Also see, for scientific details on the shifting course of Kosi and other north Bihar rivers at http://ponce.sdsu.edu/kosi_river_india.html.

the boundary lines of Mithila, except on the north, where the Himalayas are immovable" (1958: 1). This is perhaps the reason why any work on Mithila in recent times encapsulates its boundary in the vastest possible demarcation. Such as Burghart (1993) writes, "the country of Mithila extends northward from the river Ganges across Bihar and into Nepalese Terai from where the Siwalik foothills of the Himalyas emerge from the plain. Its western and eastern frontiers are ritually demarcated by the Gandaki and Kosi rivers whose headwaters originate on the Tibetan plateau, collect in inner Himalyas and turn southward across the north Indian plain to meet the Ganges. Between Gandaki and Kosi other rivers and streams such as Baghmati, Lakhandei and Kamla drain the southern flanks of the Himalyas and head southward across the country, playing every year on the hopes and fears of farmers" (Ibid.: 763).



On how the landscape of Mithila looks, it is interesting to note that, despite the market towns such as Muzaffarpur, the former royal capital Darbhanga and Samastipur, Mithila is mainly constituted by clustered villages. Dotted with paddy fields interlaced with orchard of lychee, mangoes, bamboo groves, clusters of palms or a row of sharply pruned siso trees, this is the landmass so low and flat that distant sight may not be available due to the horizon of green orchards. Sight may not, but, sounds

travel in Mithila unimpeded, suggests Burghart. The speech marks of Mithila, as more prominent features of Mithila, hence acquire the center stage[82].

Post Vedic and Pre-Moghul Mithila

The socio-cultural structure of Mithila in ancient times, as inferred by Thakur (1956), suggests the paradoxical relation between society and intellectual spectacles. While purity and pollution was basic the social tenet governing Maithil's social conduct, allocating roles and ascribing status, there were instances of philosophical debates marking them off. The Maithil Brahmins enjoyed unstinted royal patronage and remained the drinkers of 'soma' - the embodiment of sacred knowledge. The social stratification acquired tenacity along caste lines in the post-vedic age, as the *Satpatha Brahmana* indicates and Thakur argues, "it was a mid-way between the laxity of the Rgveda and the rigidity of the Sutras" (Ibid.: 73). An oft-cited example that associates caste-mobility and intellectual prowess is the instance of king philosopher Janak switching from Kshatriya varna to that of Brahmana, through the teaching of his friend Yajnavalakya. It is however not an indicator of rule on interchange of caste. Secondly, the luxury of changing caste is for king rather than for all and sundry. Similarly, oft-cited examples of women scholars such as Gargi and Maitreyi do not represent a rule for the knowledge-pursuit of women in general in Mithila[83]. In a similar vein, while men could pursue polygamy women did not. Let alone ordinary women, Thakur says, "womanhood in the higher orders is more truly represented by helpless Sita than by the stronger minded women" (Ibid.: 79).

Alongside the privileged, existed the common men and women, living on agriculture, who had to grapple with both natural calamity (mostly famine) and socio-cultural humiliation. While the privileged indulged in philosophical discourse "the common people, however did not understand those abstruse theological and philosophical speculations, (and) they were stuck to the worship of the deities of the Rgvedic period" (Ibid.: 95).

The period of the Brahmanas intervening the period of the Vedas and the Upanishadas is termed as the 'age of sacrificial ceremonials'. Thus religious practices across caste

[82] The section toward the end of this chapter deals with the language Maithili and debate on the issues related to the same. The chapter intends to explore and establish the intricate link of Mithila, its people Maithil and Maithili.

[83] Thakur rightly mentions what Gargi and Maitreyi achieved, Katyayini, another wife of the same philosopher, could not.

groups were rife with rituals and superstitions. "The Hindu theory that religions do not come form without but from within, was ridiculously ignored" (Ibid.: 96). No wonder Brahmanas, skilled in priestly jobs, occupied center stage in not only royal circles but also every day life in society. A setback for the preoccupation with *Karma kanda* (rituals and superstitions) was ushered in the Upanishadic age. The epitomizing instance to account for this point, Thakur cites, is when Janak Videh, the king philosopher and friend of Yajnayvalakya, "refused to submit to the hierarchical pretensions of the Brahmanas and asserted his right of performing sacrifices without the intervention of the priest" (Ibid.: 97). The excellence of the age stemmed from the genius of philosophers like Yajnavalakya, Gautama, Kapila, Vibhndaka, Satananda. Ironically, the best of the Upanishadic age turned out to be the reason of the fall. "Their extreme moral, philosophical and religious outlook was responsible for the dying out of their fighting genius" (Ibid.: 60). On a critical note, as depicted in the Buddhist and Jaina literatures, the Videhan kings renounced the world and became ascetics without caring for their kingdom and their people. Thus the glory of the Upanishadic age,that sprang from the age of the *Vedas* and the *Brahmanas*, was subdued by the unrest among people. This was when Buddhism and Jainism found space in people's worldview. In fact it had a precursor in the Upanisadic age. As Thakur notes, "the doctrines promulgated by Yajnyavalakya in the Brahdaranyak Upanishad are in fact completely Buddhistic" (Ibid.: 105)[84]. The Vedanta philosophy was sidelined as Mithila became part of the Vajjian confederacy of oligarchic republic in 600 B.C.

The seat of power, in this period, shifted from Mithila to Vaishali, and the latter became the hub of new ideas defining socio-cultural conditions[85]. Summarily the caste-based hereditary occupation was on decline. Thakur note, " A Brahmin lived as an archer, a carpenter, a craven guard, a snake charmer, an agriculturalist , hunter and carriage driver without incurring social stigma" (Ibid.: 129). The stronghold of Brahmans in the Videhan territory, nevertheless, did not diminish as it was still away

[84] It should however not confuse on the basic differences between the ancient philosophers of Mithila and Buddhism. They were distinct with their differences. What Thakur draws attention to is the criticality in philosophical enquiry and of worldview, which is often associated with Buddhism, is also vociferous in the Brahdaranyak Upanishad of Yajnavalakya.

[85] Seemingly, the well-to-do in Mithila found a fascination in picking new religious ideas. An example of this is Mallinatha, the nineteenth tirthankar of the Jains, who was a princess of Mithila, daughter of the then ruler of Mithila king Kumbha. It is by no means an evidence of socially deep-rooted Hinduism being substituted by Jainism, though influences in part can not be denied.

from the mainstay of Buddhism. Buddhism and Jainism could not ameliorate the basic social structure that promoted slavery of downtrodden. In fact, the status of women slipped further down. Buddha himself had nursed deep disdain of women. Any inclination toward women was equal to, in Buddhist thought, 'falling into the mouth of tiger' or 'under the sharp knife of executioner' because their bewitching beauty robes men of their heart. Yet Buddha allowed women in the monasteries only to regret it later as the cause of the downfall of monastic system. The diminishing religio-moral strength *vis-à-vis* Buddhism, power-puffed postures of the Vajjian republic posing a threat to Ajatshatru of Patliputra, and his imperial ambitions, together inflicted a setback for Vajjian state. The Magadhan commanded reigns and Mithila ushered in what historians call its 'dark age'.

The center of political gravity shifted to Patliputra while Vaishali and Mithila were provinces of Mauryan Empire. In the passage of time a Brahmanic reaction led to the break up of the Mauryan empire. The Sssassination of the last Mauryan king Brahdaratha by his general Pushyamitra Sung, a Brahmin from Bharadwaj gotra, is underscored as a decisive moment. Pusyamitra established Sung dynasty (187 to 151 B.C.), supported by Maithil Brahmans of Mithila. This is where emerged 'militant Brahminism' in political garb. Afterwards a long passage of political upheaval ensued involving the Kanvas, the Andhras, the Parthians, the Kusanas, the Guptas, the Palas, and so many short-term invaders. A new era dawned only after fourteen hundred years of political trials and tribulations as Karnata king Nanyadev founded the Karnata or Simraon dynasty (1097 A.D) proclaiming an independent Mithila. It also slipped into the hand of Vijaysena of Bengal for some time until Gangadev, son of Nanyadev, reclaimed it by pushing back the Sena. Historians records that the Karnatas were skilled in intellect as well as in polity and warfare[86]. Mithila was protected from Muslim invasions for long, till the time of Shaktisimhadev, due to its geographical location and strategic position. Muslim rulers began to sharpen their fangs against Mithila during Shaktisimhadeva, who was cruel despot and to check his autocratic power ministers had forged a council. A system of greater significance emerged during the rule of Harisimhadev, often cited as a social reformer king in the history of Mithila, who introduced *Panji-Parbandha*. It entailed classification of people on the basis of merit (caste based but encorporating significance of achievements). A

[86] Nanyadev wrote Natyashastra compiling and commenting on multiple genres of music associated with theatrical performances. Ramsimhadev too is known for having contributed to sacred literature.

decisive blow to the dynasty was, in 1324 A.D., when Ghyasuddin Tughlak on his way back from Bengal, attacked Tirhut (Mithila). King Harisimhadev entered, along with many Maithil Brahmins, (rather fled to) Nepal. While the last Karnata of Mithila founded a new dynasty in Nepal, Muhammad Tughlak named Tirhut into Tughlakpur and swept almost entire north Bihar. In Mithila, the sultan made Kameshwara Thakur a vassal. This came to be known as the Oinavara or Sugauna dynasty. Mithila was, during this rule, internally independent and externally dependent on the Muslim sultan. Any deviations from the direction of the sultan wrought havoc for the king of Mithila. The chequered history of the Oinwaras is fraught with unstable rule, toppling and displacing, but almost continuous and unhindered flourishing of literature and scholarship. Almost for the entire dynasty, the renowned poet Vidyapati seems to be a chronicler, though he was closely associated with king Sivasimha as 'friend, guide and philosopher'. He was precded by king Bhawasimha, who is known to have patronized Gonu jha, a household name till date in Mithila and was an excellent humorist[87]. The chronicler Vidyapati wrote eulogical pieces for almost each king of the dynasty, but his role acquired overt political significance only when Sivasimha refused to abide by the Sultan. Sivasimha was vanquished by the force of Sultan and his wife Lakhima devi was restored to the throne by the virtue of Vidyapati's intelligent mediations. This was, evidently, a precedent that a widow ascended to the throne. Lakhima devi was herself an erudite scholar of Sanskrit literature. She continued the legacy of the Oinwaras kings and her patronage to Vidyapati was at an all time high[88]. The noteworthy part of Lakhima devi was her Sanskrit verses she wrote to parody and condemn the *Bikauas,* who sold their daughters and sisters in marriage to the ineligible matches. Her critical approach to the society of Mithila is unusual amongst the writings of the then Mithila.

The Oinwara's decline was gradual and largely due to diverse and many known reasons. It weakened post-Sivasimha and branched out into two tiny and insignificant dynasties. Historians admit the unavailability of adequate records on the later part of the Oinwaras. Summarily, on the ruins of the Oinwaras petty zamindars controlled Mithila and paid regular tribute to the Moghul emperor Babar. This is not confirmed

[87] These two historical characters, belonging to the Oinwara age, Vidyapati and Gonu Jha are very significant because of the constant references made to them in the oral tradition of Mithila even in contemporary times.

[88] It is an unusal historical fact that most of the royal authority of Mithila did not contemplate any revenge even though they were vanquished by the arrogant Muslim rulers. Instead, they continued with their peaceful pursuit of scholarship and caring for their subjects.

but one Maithil Kayasth Majumdar, one Majlis Khan and some others were immediate successors of the Oinwaras.

Before an elaborate illustration on the relious-phisophical configuration of Mithila it is imperative to look at the later part of kingship, socio-political ups and downs, corresponding changes particularly during the Moghul period.

From Moghul to the Company

Nasrat Shah of Bengal (A.D. 1519-32) decimated the Oinwaras and ensued a hiatus replete with fractions and anarchy. Until the ascendance of Babar as the Moghul emperor, Mithila remained an annexure of the independent kingdom of Bengal as Nasrat shah had broken treaty with Delhi. Mithila as well as other parts of Bihar was detached from Bengal with the arrival of Akbar. Tirhut was included in the *subah* or province of Bihar which was under one separate Moghul governor. It was during this time, when Man Singh was the governor of Bihar and Bengal, Akbar decided to install a man of letters from Mithila, Mahamahopadhyay Mahesh Thakur as the ruler of Mithila. Here from started the rule of the Khandavala, the last major dynasty of rulers in Mithila, in roughly around 1556/7 A.D.. The Thakurs continued the tradition of patronizing and engaging with scholarship and Sanskrit learning. One of the admirable consequences of the royal tradition of patronizing emerged, during the reign of king Mahinath, in the guise of poet Locana kavi. The latter was celebrated for his erudite approach to music and literature, manifest in his work *Rajtarangini.* It was however during the reigns of Khandavala that a military Mithila raised its head too. Succeeding Narpati Thakur, who was allowed by the emperor to build up a robust army, his son Raghavsimha became ambitious. He was friendly with the Nawab of Bengal Aliwardi Khan. He was the only ruler known in the political history of Mithila who changed his surname from Thakur to Simha and thereby changed his caste from that of Brahmin into of Kshatriya. Subsequently, argues Mishra (1979), 'the 'scholar' king of Mithila assumed the role of 'warrior' king...they came to be respected, feared, and counted in the public life of north eastern India, the imperial authority lay nominally in over the whole of India, but it appears that the kingdom of Mithila functioned as more or less independent sovereigns" (Ibid.: 98). Umanatha Bakshi and Gokulanatha Bakshi were the commanding officers of the national army of Mithila which was trained by one Sardar Khan. King Narendra Simha, the greatest among the

warrior kings, took the militant Mithila to its zenith. The army participated in several expeditions and helped the Moghul suppress invasion by Afghan adventurer Mustafa Khan. Also, it was applied to deal with the aggressors from neighborhood. Bhumihars of Champaran dissented against the King of Mithila and were suppressed at Bettiah by the invincible army. The age of a fortified and militant Mithila did come to an end, starting with Pratapsimha, a process completed in Madhavsimha's reign. It was when the loyal commanders such as Bakshi and others were not paid heed and the kingship entered the permanent settlement with the British[89]. The colonial intervention, through policies of change in agrarian structure and shifting center of rule, brought about only a little change without affecting the socio-cultural arrangements (Ranjan 1998). In 1786, Tirhut, with headquarter at Muzzaffarpur included Darbhanga Raj. Darbhanga itself became the headquarters in 1867.

The later kings of this dynasty, mainly Lakshimshwara Simha (1878-1898), Rameshvara Simha (1888-1929), and Kameshwar Simha (1929-1962), are known for their supports to the further development of literature and philosophy[90]. The legacy of supporting traditional education assumed novel face as an inclination toward English education surfaced. It was however not plane story of English superceding the vernacular. In the beginning of the 19th century Mahraja Chhatra singh extended support to only Hindu educational institutions. Later on his son Rudra singh made heavy donations to establish the first ever anglo-vernacular school at Muzzaffarpur, which was actually part of Lord Harding's scheme. This, despite the fact that the Raj schools, run by the royal administration, were preferred to the colonial schools. Meanwhile the system of wards administration came into effect and the education of the minors of the landholders of Mithila was being conducted by the colonial administration. The introduction of English education to public was not easy and smooth, as Jha observes,

---

[89] Post- king Madhav simha, the history of Mithila becomes almost devoid of any event worth recounting in history. Perhaps this is the reason why most historians stop their historical narrative at this point. Mishra spends two more pages and draws the family tree of the last dynasty with the tail-end consisting of the Lakshmishwar Simha (1882-1898), Rameshwar Simha (1888-1929) and Kameshwar Simha (1929-1962).

[90] In the popular lore of Mithila, the later kings of the last dynasty, hitherto, have esteemed place and they are often remembered in association with diverse temples constructed by them. In the Raj precincts, now the campus of Mithila University, there are a number of well-maintained temples where people throng for religious purpose, and unwittingly thank the last Maithil kings too. One such temple, called Shyama Mai Mandir is said to be built on the remains of Mharaja Lakshimishwar Singh.

"all efforts on the part of the government to spread English education in the district of Tirhoot had failed...the region being a stronghold of orthodox Brahmins it resisted the introduction of a foreign language in the domain of learning" (1972: xvi). The entry of English education in Darbhanga is synchronized with the accession of Maharaja Lakshmishvar singh to the throne. Gradually, by 1871, as a private vernacular-anglo school came up in Madhubani with support from both the Raj and the government, a thaw began to appear. Lakshmishwar Singh also introduced entrance examinations and competition for employment. But no fee-structure was accepted by the Raj even though the British government was interested in it. Maharaja Rameshvar Singh was categorically for orthodox Sanskrit learning but the public legitimacy for it was waning as it did not ensure a value in terms of jobs.

Socio-cultural and Religio-philosophical configuration

For politico-administrative purposes, Mithila was called Tirhut, while as socio-cultural configuration the region of Maithili speaking people has been called Mithila. It is not homogenous as far as socio-cultural structure is concerned. Neither is it so in religio-philosophical sense. And this is despite the fact that orthodoxy of Brahmins has been predominant. Diversity of sects, within Hindu fold itself, alone articulates the socio-cultural acceptance of cleavages. Speaking primarily about orthodox Brahmins, Mishra says, "A Maithil generally has the three fold mark on the forehead representing the following symbols- the horizontal lines, marked with ashes (*bhashma*), represent devotion to Siva; the white vertical *chandana* representing the faith in Vishnu and the red sandal paste or vermillion representing veneration for Sakti" (1979: 125). In addition to the trinity of Siva, Sakti and Vishnu, the Maithil also worship Puranic reincarnation of Vishnu and their consorts.

Worshipping Siva however exhibits the elementary form of Maithili religious life, and hence Siva seems to be probably the oldest god of Mithila. The Maithil make earthen lingam (the elongated shape of clay-made Siva), of diverse shapes and sizes. In every household Siva is worshipped in the form of earthen linga. Women or men or children gather soil from cleaner places, knead it and roll to chop off the faceless figurines of Siva. Such earthen linga is easy to make, handy to worship and eco-friendly when discharged post-worship. On occasions of religious significance, lakhs of earthen lingams are made and worshipped. This uncanny liberty in making the earthen lingam and unstinted belief in Siva is congruent with the faith that only Siva ensures salvation

(liberation from the worldly cycle of birth and death). Umpteen Siva temples in Mithila, mostly low in pomp and appearance while high on importance, dot the entire religio-cultural landscape. The list of such temples is fairly long, comprising Kapileshwarsthana, Madaneshwarsthana, Sitanatha (at Jaynagar, Madhubani), Sri Jaleshwar (at village Bhari), Hariharsthana (Janakpur, Nepal), Kapileshwarsthana, Ugnanatha (at Davanu, Mihila), Bhairavnatha (Rajkund, Muzaffarpur), Haleshvara (Sitamarhi), Chandeshvara (Darbhanga), Kusheshvara (Rauta, Hirni), Singheshvara (Madhepura, Saharsa), Budhanatha (Bhagalpur), Ajgavinatha (Sultanganj), Sundarnatha (Purnea), Kamadanatha (Darbhanga), Goivinatha (Mongyr), Ksiresvara (Kauradi, Nepal), Ugranatha (Bhavanipur), Mukteshvarnatha (Ganauli), and many others. So much is the depth of influence of Siva-worhsipping, that almost every scholarly work, poetic-literary and philosophical, expresses devotion to Siva, Nachari and Maheshvani[91], poetic composition of Vidyapati and others dominate the oral-acoustic surroundings of Mithila, as every household has rendition of these songs on the ritual-occasion and even otherwise. The most recent addition in the conglomerate of god and deity is Chandra (moon): the ornamental associate of Siva. Maharaja Hemangada Thakur, of the Khandavalakula, started and popularized it, and thus celebration of Chaurchanda (worshipping chandrama of chaturthi: moon on the fourth night in the month of Kartik in the lunar calendar, roughly in the roman month of October), became a folk festival.

Worshipping Sakti is equally important as the belief goes that Sakti blesses with *Siddhi* (realization of the aspired). Since medieval times, scholars have been influenced by Sakti. Vidyapati's predecessor Devaditya, Madan Upadhyay, and even Vidyapati[92] are to name a few. A sacred place for Gasuani (the godess) in household is a ubiquitous feature. Any auspicious occasion begins with a rendition of Gosaunik geet (song invoking the blessings of deity). Pertaining to Sakti-worshipping are several works on *tantra*. To name a few are Vidyapati's *Durgabhakti tarangini*, Govind Thakur's *Pujapaddhati*, Devanatha'a *Tantra kaumudi* and *Mantra Kaumudi*, Narsimha Thakur's *Tara bhakti*, etc. Diverse instances in every day life reflects Tantra (Sakti) influence, such as: Aipana (Alpana/Tantra, a design made the floor with the wet powder of rice) made by women on any auspicious occasion, Jog songs

[91] Nachari is devotional hymns in praise of Siva, and, Maheshvani is songs depicting marriage of Siva and Parvati/Gaura.

[92] The famous poem of Vidyapati, 'Jay-jay Bhairavi Asur Bhayauni...', is taught in textbooks and sung in every household as a folksong.

meant to attract husband, joga-tona and Jhaad-phoonk (magic charm), names of people such as Tarachand, Tara charan Tantradhari, Khadag dhari, Adya charan etc., belief in Dakini and Dayan (witches, who possess magical power), Kumari-Puja (worshipping, feeding and gifting virgin), the traditional headgear which every Maithil man dons even these days on special occasions called *Paag* has tantrik character, etc.. The red dot of vermillion or red apparel is the most common sign of the Sakti-Tantra influence. Scholars also highlight the tantrik character of the Maithili script and the geography of Mithila. Even families and villages are dedicated to Sakti, such as Harinagar, Mangrauni, Koilakha, Uchchaitha, Bangama etc. Of innumerable instances of Tantra blending with Maithil culture, Aipana is an important key to understand the storehouse of meaning. Commenting on this, Mishra says, "the ancient purpose of these symbols might have been to propitiate the earth as the prime source of fertility, to awaken Sakti i.e. energy to seek protection from the malignant forces of nature, disease and sorcery to provide a tool through which the memories of the race could be abstracted and preserved to be communictade in group participationa svisula statements of thousands of years of man's history" (Ibid.: 234). The visual content and design of Aipana vary from occasion to occasion. On special occasions, such as Gosauni puja or Styanarayn Katha-puja or some bigger occasion Aipana consists of ambitious design and all kinds of images, of lotus, fish, snake and mandala etc. On general occasions, it is simpler in format and presentation. The customary art of drawing Aipana is said to have developed full-throttle by 14th century, with continuity from the times of the Puranas and consisting the Tantra effect.

A proximity to Nepal and Tibet is said to have caused the relationship between Tantra and Sakti, and the deeper influence of it on Maithil every day life. It refers to Buddhism and absorption of it in Hindu fold. It is said to have been absorbed in mainly two ways: one is by assimilation of tantra form into Sakti-worship, and the second is by incorporating Buddha as one of the ten reincarnations of Vishnu (Mishra 1979). Chandeshwara had specified a day to worship Buddha in his scholarly work Krityaratnakar, and Mahayana goddess Tara is a sought after deity among the Maithil worshippers.

The absorption of the Buddhist influence is not a simple tale, as there are historical evidences of discursive confrontation between the orthodox Brahmanic scholarship and the Buddhist thinkers. When Mithila was not hub of political activity and Vajjian confederacy was at the center of power, a strong Maithil opposition to Buddhism was

in the making. Seer-philosophers and logicians from both sides dared each other in philosophical debates. It was a way of earning epithets as well as fortifying the thought process. " For example, if a Buddhist logician defeated a greater Nyaya or Mimamsa thinker in a great public debate, attended by learned scholars from every part of the country, his fame at once spread all over the country and he could secure a large numbers of followers on the spot" (Thakur 1988: 509). In Mithila, the winning spree was almost a prerogative of the traditional scholars. Based on the Nyaya Sutra of Gautama, and Vatsyayan's commentary on the same, Udyotkara challenged the renowned Buddhist logician Dinnaga (500 A.D.). In 984 A.D., Udayana wrote Nyaya Kusumanjali and attacked Buddhist conceptions, especially of the non/existence of god. Around the 7th century A.D. another Buddhist scholar Dharmakirti emerged in popularity, who retrieved Dinnaga's philosophical arguments from the discursive ravages. But around the same century Udyaktara, Kumaril and Shankaracharya were dynamic in their impact. As soon as Shankara defeated Mandan Mishra, a Mimamsa scholar in Mithila, the Vedantik philosophy was shot to peerless heights and immense following of Shankara followed. It heralded entire India and left little scope for Buddhist scholars. Toward 1200 A.D., Ganesha Upadhyay propounded Nava-Nyaya, yet another milestone in the history of philosophy in Mithila.

In sum, no other religion, not even Islam though Muslim invaders were ruthless marauders, than Buddhism aroused the philosopher-logicians of Mithila. The primary tenet of Buddhism that advocated 'no idolatory- no priests- no karma theory' and aimed at radical change in structure was more serious a challenge for the Maithil think tank than the Khiljis, the indirect rulers of the Moghul, and that of the British who did not interfere in the socio-cultural design. But then, the rejection of Buddhism is not unilinear, as there is clear evidence of acceptance too. With regard to *Tantra* part of Buddhism, majority of scholars are unequivocal in acknowledging the influence. Buddhist Tantra practices was two-fold. One was Vama-marga, that was of Aghora who practiced it in cremation ground with unusual means. The other is Dakshina-marga, practiced through the means of Yoga. Dominant was the Aghora Tantra that inspired awe and fear amongst the rulers as well as the ruled in Mithila. It became, however, the Achilles heel of Buddhism in Mithila as the Aghora tantrik indulged in debauchery, fraudulence and exploitation. It fell victim to Muslim attacks, could not explain people's misery in the face of plight, and lost any legitimacy whatsoever. A rechristened version of Tantra entered in Maithil Hinduism, in the forms of art and

aesthetics, providing deeper source of meaning. In yet another way Buddhism impacted Maithil society. As Purnendu Ranjan (1988) informs, many Brahmins came to join Buddhist monasteries and began to follow Buddhist doctrine. The discursive upheaval that left Buddhism in intellectual as well as social tatters discouraged the Maithil followers of it. They decided to return to the status quo in around 13th century. But they were given only secondary/lower status in society than that of a Brahmin. Thus they were called *Bhumihars* (a caste in Mithila that intrigues any observer). These Bhumihar Brahmins turned their monastery into *thakurwadis* (a rather Maithil term for abode of god) and thus attempted to compensate for their lost glory.

As a proposition, it can be argued that the decline of Buddhism was also due to it's overly stress on ascetic life and detachment from women. On the contrary, the traditional social structure of Mithila encouraged ascetic pursuits within the non-ascetic format of living. Thus, we find that all the scholars, poets, logicians and philosophers of Mithila are family men. No wonder, then, the celebrated scholar Jyotireshvara, in his Varnaratnakara, makes the contempt of ascetic cults explicit.
Secondly, Buddhism along with Jainism also brought about a focus on heterodoxy in the traditional space of Brahmanic orthodoxy (Ranjan 1988). These religions were set on decline after 13th century, without much following, but the idea of heterodoxy and thereof dissent was continued by Tantrics, Nathpanthis and Siddhas, paving way for Kabirpanth in Mithila. It began to spread in 17th century in Bihar. One of the disciples of Kabir, Bhagodas, established the first ever *Math* (monastery) at Dhanauti (presently in Saran district of Bihar) at the fringe of Mithila. Another disciple Jagudas founded *math* at Andhrathadi (district Madhubani) and Basantpur (district Samastipur) in Mithila. Ranjan suggest that, as a dissent against caste structure, "intermediary castes and some lower castes and even some Muslims, became members of the panth (the sect of followers of Kabir), which flourished under the guidance of its institutional base-the maths" (Ibid. : 5). There were four Acharya Gaddi (the oldest *maths*) in the region (in and around Samastipur district of Mithila). Rosra, now a district in the region of southern Mithila, has been the most active of all the *maths* until very late. Curiously, there were Brahmin followers too who were initiated into these *Maths*. The example of the *math* at Rambagh in Purnea town, founded by a Brahmin who renounced possessions, is oft-cited. Some Brahmins who turned to Kabir panth called themselves *Sat-Kabir*. The spread of Kabirpanth was not

even and consistent, yet it's presence was felt deeply. So much so that Ràmanandi Math, that pursued Vaishnavism and assumed to be a Hindu alternative to Kabirpanth, emerged under the royal patronage. It could not however obliterate the dynamic patches of Kabirpanth in Mithila. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Kabirpanth assumed greater fillip as reformist organization and also joined the attack on Brahminical traditional ritualism. While the reformist crusade was confined to township, Kabirpanth was popular and effective in villages.

In the light of the above synopsis of the socio-religious configuration of Mithila it is not hyperbolic to say that the trajectory of religions, though largely dominated by Brahmins' ritualistic Hinduism, includes other religions registering their presence. The ideas of the Vedic times, and the reaffirmation and improvisations in the Upanishad remained prerogative of literate Hindus. Buddhism could not change the religious configuration of the Maithils, however it only added to the pantheon of Maithil gods and deities. Important to note that it aroused interest in heterodoxy, leading to the foundation of other cults. While extremist cults such as *Nathpantha*, *Siddhas*, *Vamachar* and *Dakshinachr* Buddhists were on the periphery, Kabirpanth found relatively better elbowroom.

The religions of people were a little more than animistic as they worshipped not only natural objects but also Shiv, Shakti and Vishnu. There was, though, nothing so prominent to be called Maithil Vaishnavism, poets did devote time and space to lord Vishnu[93]. Apart from these, Maithil also worshipped natural objects (flora and fauna) such as Surya (sun god), Tulsi (Basil), Naag (snakes in general and Cobra in particular), and others. The temple of Surya, belong to Oinvara era, at Kandha (of Saharsa district) speaks of a possible sun-cult. Another image and praising inscription in the Andhrathari (Madhubani dsitrict) also confirms the Maithil sun-worshipping. And the cultural festival, that heralds the entirety of Bihar and also UP, called Chhathi, to worship Sun god was celebrated in Mithila too. Needless to mention that the sun is an important co-ordinate in the other festivals of fasting such as *Ekadasi* (eleventh day of certain months from the local calender), or occasions of Ganga-snan (Bathing in the Ganges) and others. Similarly, the tulsi plant has a quiet but an abiding significance in the Maithil household. Always located outside, in courtyard,

[93] Vidyapati's poetry, indeed, brisge the difference between Siva and Vishnu, by using the word Harihar. Others wrote in praise of Vishnu without making Vishnu the ruling deity of Mithila.

of the home, is the cemented pedestal in which the *tulsi* is planted. Every morning and evening women worship tulsi plant and a tulsi leave is mixed with almost everything to attach sanctity. Most importantly, "at the time of death, the body of the dying person is brought and kept in the open court-yard near the tulsi plant" (Mishra 1979: 135).

Philosophical posterity and perpetuity

The philosophical posterity of Mithila spans the Vedic age, the intervening times of the Brahmanas and the Upanishads, and later the age of Mimamsa, Nyay and Vaisheshiki in response to Buddhist philosophical challenge. Accredited to learning the Vedas, villages were named after them, such as Yajuada for learning Yajurveda, Riga for the Rgveda, Athari for Atharvaveda. Similarly, villages were named for learning Mimamsa and Nyaya. Yajnyavalakya and his *magnum opus Brihadaranyakopnishad* are iconic representation of Mithila's glorious philosophical prowess. The famous philosophical debate between Yajnyavalakya and his philosopher wife Maitreyi is merely on example of philosophico-intellectual pursuits in Mithila. Mythological narratives are replete with such engagements of not only scholars but also of kingship. Almost every ruler seems to have aspired to earn the epithet of king philosopher and hence have contributed into the scholarship. Thus, no wonder, a continuity in this trend marks Mithila off with distinctions, till very late (the last dynasty of the Khandavalakula). The philosophical underpinnings of Mithila set values and ambitious ideals: while they aimed at scholarly-intellectually superiority, they also reaffirmed faith in 'reasoned existence of divine'. Every scholar would bring in not only a feel of devotion but also an argumentative engagement on the issues of divinity. Most importantly, the ideals, of this-world as well as the other-world, were pursued in the social domain, including the idea of asceticism[94].

Thus Mithila was so much entangled in philosophy that it is never possible to extricate philosophy from history.[95]

---

[94] It instantly reminds of Heidegger's formulation of Being-there (Dasein) that lives out there in society, make use of social resources and pursues greater ideals.

[95] The historical account in the previous sections vouches for the observation and wisdom that philosophy of Mithila, a cultural region, ought not to be seen in separation. One reason that they are enmeshed, and the other reason is that most of the overly glorification of Mithila is based on the exclusive talk of Maithil philosophy. Even historians are susceptible to this tendency and thus they err at the fundamental on scholarship. In this regard, Thakur and Mishra are no exception as they present philosophy of Mithila in separate chapters, apart from the historical perspectives. As a matter of fact, philosophy of Mithila makes better sense in the historical context.

Maithil Society: *in a glance*

It is evident from the above account that socio-religious structure of Mithila, despite continuity, received changes in nature and scope. But change was never a unilateral rule. Amidst constant regal topsy-turvy, Mithila did not change much in terms of people's worldview and socio-cultural structure. Not even the introduction of Islam could upset the status quo and stronghold of Brahmans remained unfazed. In fact, the latter became more aggressively defensive and introduced more rigidity to norms of social behaviour. Thakur acknowledges it, interpretatively saying, "the advent of the Muslims in India in the 12th-13th century A.D. brought in its wake another crisis in a more menacing form. The Hindus had lost their political independence, and the strain on the cohesion of Hindu society was fast reaching the breaking point. It was at this critical hour in their history that the Brahmins essayed and reinforced the tottering edifices as far as possible" (1988: 340). Thus, there happened writing of digests and commentaries, codification of laws and rules of conduct in the Smrti works. No wonder then, despite certain exogenous influences such as incorporation of *Purdah*, the fundamental structure remained in tact. Steeped in feudalism was stratification along caste lines and palpable inferiority of low caste and women[96]. In the midst of such social conditions, Thakur acknowledges, the perpetuity of the classical art and literature. Maithili literature, apart from Sanskrit in greater proportion, emerged and assumed acceptance among the pundits of sanskritik tradition. It is said to have started somewhere in the first quarter of the 14th century A.D. when Jyotirishvara Thakur composed his monumental work Varnaratnakara in Maithili language. Onwards, Maithili replaced Apabhramsa. This was the earliest version of Maithili known as Avahatta, the ligua-franca for scholars-poets-philosophers, till 1830. Meanwhile Maithili flowered as heavy use of it amounted to improvisation and sophistication. Apart from the name of Vidyapati, whose crowning presence in every household of Mithila is an abiding feature, there are Candidasa, Govinddasa, Mahesh thakur, and the list would be endless, of those who helped Maithili prosper[97].

---

[96] Thakur is confident with such conclusions, which bear two tendencies: one (unstated) is to look at past and consider things 'good' or 'bad' with (again unstated) reference to the present; second, there is no where proper reflection on the folk's intellectual corpus of knowledge, i.e. folklore, and hence not much knowledge of how the folk perceived the social structure.

[97] Vidyapati's poetry entails a range of emotions, from sensuality and lust, earthly and mundane, to, holy and pious, devotional and renunciatory. Among some genres of his lyric-poetry, Nachari finds place of prestige in Abu Fazal's Ain-e-Akbari.

Before an elaborate discussion on Maithili, the language of the region, it is imperative to understand as to who are the people of the region. The inhabitants of the region are generally called Maithil. However, the term demands a little systematic reflection due to its misleading notions.

Meaning of *B*eing Ma*i*thil

There is an intellectual pitfall attached to the usage of the nomenclature Maithil[98]. It is likely to yield confounding notions if discussed as an exclusive feature of a traditional society. Most of the historians too are susceptible to this tendency amounting to ambiguous comments. Thus on one hand they would seek to legitimate the social structure as it is by resorting to structural-functional logic: simply, *it was 'so' because it served 'so and so' purpose in society.* On the other hand, they also do not neglect socio-historical facts that suggest beyond simplistic structural-functional logic[99].

Mithila is hastily associated with Maithil Brahmins and thus configured as an elaborate term for diverse categories of Brahmins, albeit against the textual injunction as well as historical condition. The ways of devising the categories of Brahmins, traditionally, has been on the basis of association with learning of the Vedas, gotra, and further subdivision on the basis of geographical location. In an elaborate footnote, however, Mishra intends to correct the notion arguing, "...some people are under the impression that the term 'Maithila' means a Maithil Brahmin' only. No doubt, the term Maithil is found in medieval literature to indicate a schlolar of Mihtila, who was mostly a Brahmin...but commonly speaking and also historically this is not quite correct. The word 'Maithila' and 'Tirubhukta' are very often found quoted or referred to side by side with the term 'Maithila' used for a Kshatriya ruler, for Kayastha musician, or clerk or even for persons of the so-called untouchable class" (1979: 284). Thus considering the innate polyphony of the term 'Maithila', there is little scope for reducing the category into only Brahmins of Mithila. Despite the predominance of Brahmins in Maithil religio-cultural and socio-philosophical configuration of Mithila, Maithil is not an epithet for any particular caste group. Nor can we afford to perceive

[98] When asked, any professor of Mithila University would like to wax eloquent on the glory of Maithil and by this term, they would simply mean certain groups of Brahmins. While the glorification is itself subject to questioning, the confounding nature of the usage is to be explained and perhaps corrected.

[99] In the foregone section of this chapter we have already mentioned Upendra Thakur's vacillation between structural-functional and conflict logics. Similarly Mishra would write of Maithil as a 'happy and contented life' while he would also write long footnotes to point out the intriguing feature of the term 'Maithil'.

even Maithil Brahmin as a homogenous category. This is despite the uniformity of Maithil Brahmins in exhibiting ritual practices or scholarly pursuits. Notwithstanding, the uniformity is only at the level of exterior of social life. Mishra argues, "We learn from traditions and certain other refernces found in ancient books, that the Maithil Brahmins were first divided into two main groups - one (who were) living on the eastern bank of the river Kausiki (also called Kosi) and other on the southern...those who lived on the eastern bank belonged to the higher hierarchy of Brahmnas, when looked form the point of view of purity of blood, merit and scholarship, while those who lived on the western bank were of lower grades" (Ibid.: 285).

The division (and also discrimination thereof) is deeply etched in the collective conscience of the Maithil, thus a tendency to look down upon any body who is from the west or south as culturally inferior, no matter upper caste or lower caste. Furthermore, the textual injunction against the exclusiveness of the term Maithil *vis-à-vis* Maithil Brahmin is expressed in a Sanskrit phrase, "*Mithilayambhavah Maithilaha*" (one who lives in Mithila is Maithil). In this regard Mishra notes in a footnote, "so the right view is to regard every person who lives within the geographical limits of Mithila or Tirubhukti a 'Maithil' irrespective of caste, creed and language. Linguistically however, even the Magdhans may be called Maithil as Grierson and some of the modern linguists hold[100]" (Ibid.: 285).

Along these lines Maithil social structure explicates rules and regulations keeping in tune with the ancient textual inunctions (such as from Yajnavalakya Smrti, Patanjali Vyakaran Mahbhasya). Mostly, they are aimed at *Karma* (action) to direct the course of *Janma* (birth). Rules of marriage are crucial in this regard. No wonder from Jyotireshvara to Vidyapati and Vacaspati, every scholar has described the folkways involved in the process of marriage. Most important in this regard is the classification of Brahmnas, on the basis of Janma and Karma. The systematic classification under the patronage of the Karnata dynasty king Harisimhadeva was known as 'Panji-Prabandha'[101]. It was (and is) the "institution of having regular genealogical records of the families of Mithila in order that matrimonial relations may necessarily and without much trouble may not take place within the prohibited degrees" (Ibid.: 290).

---

[100] The linguistic question would be discussed in a separate, following, section, as it presents great deal of complexity expanding and enriching the category of Maithil.

[101] Brahmans and Kayasthas of Mithila have, to some extent, maintained the tradition of Panji-Prabnadha. Panjikar or hereditary genealogists go on annual tours to register the changes, death of old and birth of new members, and marital alliances and kinship-expansions.

As a guess, the institution came into existence in Sake 1232 (1310 AD). It consists of three broad categories of Maithil:

a). the Srotriya: rigidly devoted to the performance of *Nitya karma* (daily religious duties) and acquired knowledge of *sastras* (scriptures) ensuing the birth in the Brahmin family.

b). the Yogya: literally, 'capable' of becoming Srotriya by pursuing and emulating the karma of the latter and thereby rising in the status, also includes befallen Brahmins who dwindled in status due to some inferior actions.

c). the Jayavara: meaning common people of society, it is largest in number and consists almost entire non-Brahmin groups.

The iota of flexibility, as far as rise in social status, and thus mobility, is concerned is only in principle. Only the matrimonial principle is supposed to be means for such rise, following the injunctions from the *Yajnavalakya smrti*. It is however negated under the prescribed rules of marriage, for it is must to observe the gotra and pravara (subdivision within gotra) variation. "A girl and boy can have the adhikara (right) for marriage when the paternal side of the bride has no relations within the sixth generation and from the maternal side upto the fifth generation" (Ibid.: 293). This was to be adhered within caste-fold and outside gotra-pinda. Marrying a daughter in a higher status family, *kulin* or *Bahlamanush*, became a source of social evil, as the so-called Kulin or Bhalamanush married girls from lower-status families for monetary and material benefits. Such *Kulins* were contemptuously called *Bikauas*[102] (vendors).

Apart from the two categories of Brahmans, on the basis of geographical east-south location, and Srotriya, Yogya and Jayavara of the Panji-Prabandha, they are also categorized according to surnames. Some of the well-known surnames are *Acharya, Pathak, Upadhyaya (Jha)* and *Mishra* for the learned Brahmans; *Kumar, Simha, Thakur* for ruling class Brahmans; *Khan, Raichaudhury, Mander or Mandala* for administrators; and *Goswami or Gosain* for those who attained *tantrik siddhi*. While some surnames emerged in association with Brahmins scholarship on Vedas and ancient texts, others evolved under the historical condition of the Muslim rule as derivative of diverse occupations. Additionally, there are the *Pachchima Babhans* or

[102] There is unanimity amongst the scholars, as Mishra's reference to Girindranath Dutt quoted by Risley in 'People of India' shows, about Maithil origin of Kulinism. The Brahmins of Bengal borrowed the system of Kulinism, in a rather more degenerated form. There is however, no concrete historical evidence or systematic research to establish it.

Bhumihars[103] who were petty Zamindars (landlords) and guessed to have descended from the mix of Kshatriya and Brahman origin. Commonly found surnames of Bhumihars are Mishra, Pathak, Singh, Thakur, Sharma and Rai etc.

Yet another category of lower-status Brahmans is that of those who officiate the Antyeshti Samskara (the last rite, post-death, associated with creamtion and post-cremation rituals). They are called by various names such as *Kantaha*, *Mahbrahmana* and *Mahapatra*. While they are the respected people to have food, before any body else, as soon as Shraddh karma (cremation rites) are over, they are not considered auspicious for other occasions. Lastly there are *Bhatta Brahman* who, as bards, visit the rich and capable to sing their eulogy (*Virudavali*), and the *Sakadvipin* who are occupationally *Vaidya* (traditional health experts in indigenous herbs and medicines) mostly found in Gaya and Samastipur districts.

Among the Kayasth, there are mainly two groups, the *Karna Kayasth* and *the Pachhima Kayasth*. The Karnas are supposed to have come to Mithila with the Karnata dynasty founder king Nanyadev. They shared higher socio-political space with the brahmans, wore the traditional Maithil headgear *paag*, and earned repute doing accounts. Nevertheless, they were treated lower in ritual status and they did not wear *Yajnopavit* (sacred thread), nor recite the Vedas. Names of the Maithil Kayasth were suffixed by surnames such as *Thakur, Raut, Datta, Chaudhury, Das, Mallik,* and even *Majumdar.*

The Kshatriya or the Rajput, valued kula or vamsha (descent). Some such Kulas, as the Varnratnakar of Jyotirishvara Thakur [104] shows, are *Paramar, Chauhans, Kacchhavahas, Chandelas, Baisvara, Guhilas Bhatti,* and so on.

The 'Meaning of Being Maithil' is hence not to be reduced to one or other category of Brahmans. It is heterogeneous, consisting of diverse categories of Brahmanas and other caste groups. In a similar vein, the language that helps to identify the Maithil is varied, albeit it is uniformly called Maithili.

---

[103] In the forgone section, Purnendu Ranjan was cited to offer a glimpse of the origin of Bhumihars- as those who converted to Buddhism and then reconverted back to Hindu fold as Buddhism lost ground in Mithila. The Darbhanga District Gazateeer supports this probability. Besides, there has always been a mild conflict between Brahmans and Bhumihars, with the former denying the superiority of socio-ritual status. But, both these categories collapse and become almost one at Muzzaffarpur of Mithila, argues Mishra.

[104] The Varnaratnakar of Jyorishvara Thakur is a major source of reference to undertsand the demographic distinctions of Mithila. Most of the historical accounts of Maithil and Mithila dwells upon it.

Maithili: neither *Junglee* nor *Bihari*[105]

The colonial recordings, by colonial linguists and also native scholars, provokes the questions on the linguistic validity of Maithili. What is Maithili, whose language is it, where is it found/spoken etc., are the questions that arise as we proceed in the debate. Is it one particular language or there are diverse variants within it? Can it be lumped with other dialects of the region and relegated to the fictitious categories such as *Bihari*? Is a search of Maithili somewhat wild goose hunt like it was for a language called *Junglee*? The debate would attempt to answer all these questions, only if prefixed by a brief historical account of the rise and development of the language.

In tandem with the historical account of Mithila, that asserts that the usage of 'Mithila' was predated by the usage of Videh and Tirhut, the rise of language Maithili has to be viewed. Conceptualized on an evolutionary scheme are languages, Prakrit (700 BC), Apabhramsha (700-1100 AD) and Avahatta (1100-1300 AD) in the order of emergence. The Magadhi Apabhramsha was widespread in Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The earliest form of Maithili is traced to roughly around 1097 corresponding with the founding of the Karnata dynasty which occurred following the decline of the Pala dynasty in the Magadh region. Notwithstanding the *de facto* beginning of Maithili in this age, it could not be effective in literary circles until the Oinwara dynasty ascended to the throne. For long time, though, it was not called Maithili. Avahatta or Mithila Apabhramsha were the known names for the language of the region. Albeit, it was recorded as Tourtiana (Tirhutia) in Albhabatus Brahmnaicum (1771). The standard form of Maithili evolved to the fullest in the middle ages when the Khandavalakula was at the helm of power. Somewhat in coincidence, in 1801, Colebrook noted in *Asiatic Researches* a language by the name of 'Mithelee' or 'Mythili'. But then, Mishra (1998) notes that it remained doubly named, some calling it *Maithili* while the others continued with the name *Tirhutia*: Sir Asirkin Pery called it *Tirutia* and clubbed it with Bengali while Sir Joan Bims called it Maithili and clubbed it with Hindi. Sir George Grierson is hailed for establishing the name of the vernacular Maithili in 1880[106].

---

[105] Bihari is the philological prototype proposed by Grierson to club all the three languages of Bihar Maithili, Magahi and Bhojpuri, on which scholars express logical reservations. Secondly, 'Junglee' is a fictitious language of the Punjab Province which everybody reports knowledge of but nobody can confirm as to who speak it. Grierson found it intriguing a search.

[106] The scholars of Mithila are unanimous in paying tribute to Grierson for establishing it as Maithili in the survey records. So much so that, there is a 'Grierson chowk', a juncture on the merger of diverse roads, in Madhubani district of Mithila, as a token of respect to Sir George Grierson. But the feeling of

It is interesting to glance at the early phase in the rise of Maithili language for two reasons. One, that it detects the poetic tradition that supported the growth of Maithili. Secondly, it also shows a switch from the language of the literate to the language of masses. It is indeed important for the research on oral tradition of Mithila, which presents the antecedents of the intricate relation between the classical and the folk. Mishra (1998) puts it in the three-fold chronological division to examine the growth of Maithili literature. It however also serves a purpose of understanding the rise and growth of Maithili language. The early Maithili literature (1300-1600) coincides with the Kranata kings Nanyadev and Harisimhadeva encouraging the development of the Maithili school of music in around 900-1300 AD. The first ever literature[107], though disputed in clear linguistic origin, was *Charyapada* (*or Carya padas*) in proto-Maithili dialect midway between standard Maithili and standard Bengali. These were the padas, the songs of the Buddhist saints. Jha argues about the language of the *Charyapada*, "as a matter of fact the language represents a proto-Maithili dialect of the Chikachiki area of today, an area which lies midway between the regions of standard Maithili and Bengali. Naturally, such a language is expected to have points of similarity and difference with both, standard Maithili and Bengali; though for obvious reasons, especially grammatical, Chikachiki still remains a Maithili dialect" (Jha 1958: 36)[108]. The *Varnaratnakara* by Jyorishvara Thakur was the earliest undisputed work in the vernacular, however not entirely distinguishable from Bengali. Alongside setting the poetic convention in Maithili language, *Varnaratnakara* presents rich social anthropological account of Mithila. But then, curiously, *Varnaratnakara* does not mention Mithila Apabhramsha, the language of the book itself, in the huge list of languages presented in the book (Jha 1958). Obviously, there is ambivalence toward the language of the region in the time of Jyotirishvara Thakur, which begins to disappear in the time of Vidyapati. The former was guided by the dominance of Sanskrit which did not recognise Maithil Apabhramsha. On the other

---

reverence is not unequivocal, for Grierson finally ended up considering Maihtili as a part of a language group which he called Bihari. The Maithil scholars often laugh at the alleged slip of Grierson in creating a language group which does not exist.

[107] An ambiguity in this regard as Jha also mentions Vcaspati's ninth century AD commentary on the Sankarbhasya, on Vedantsutra, known as Bhamati, as the oldest work in Maithili, though with an overtone of Sanskrit.

[108] Jha also mentions the arguments of Rahul Sankrityayana who held the language of the Carya padas close to Magahi. To quote, "Sankrityayan maintains, the writers were living either at Vikramshila (which is in the east of Mithila), or at Nalanda (which is not very far from Maithili speaking tract)" (1958: 36).

hand, Vidyapati's works, in the genre of *Giti Kavya* (ballad-poetry) took Maithili poetics to heights. It is with Vidyapati's[109] work that Avahatta Maithili assumes a status independent of Sanskrit (the then language of classical-literate pundits). Vidyapati is credited to have founded the trend of writing in *Desil Bana* (desabhasha/vernacular of people). His works such as *Kirti Lata* is of historical significance too, as he describes the Muslim invasion and the socio-cultural space shared by the natives of Mithila and the newly converted as well as the outsider Muslims. Another work, *Kirti Pataka* describes the battle between the Oinwara king Sivasimha and Muslim invaders. Besides, Vidyapati is, hitherto, celebrated for writing poetry on love and devotion. Mishra argues, "The poet wrote this work (Kirti lata) in a language which is easily understood by the common people but at the same time he was particular that his work should not be inferior and so he wrote in Avahatta language" (1979: 179). Following this many poets and scholars, contemporaries and successors of Vidyapati, took to write in Avahatta mixed with the folk tone and tenor rather than writing in sanskritised Apabhramsha. Amritkara, Chaturbhuj, Govinda, Bhishma and, Laknhima and Chandralekha, are oft-mentioned poets who followed Vidyapati's trend. The vernacular also incorporated the Muslim influence as the loan words from Arabic and Persian figure in the then compositions. *Varnaratnakara* and *Kirtilata* have words like tuluk (Turk), Eir (arrow), Pyaju (onion), ohda (post), mouja (village), adab/adaf (respect), dewan/diwan (minister), tabela/ astabal (stable), sadar/sadr/darwaza (main gate) etc.

The standard form of Maithili is said to have been established in the middle ages and became the main language of not only everyday speech but also the official *lingua franca* of the royal court of the Khadavalakula dynasty. In modern times, roughly 1860 onward, when Darbhanga Raj was in power, the British reigned indirectly, Maithili was proscribed from the official order and remained only as a medium as well as subject of study.

The linguistic survey of India, conducted by Grierson, recorded variety within Maithili. Thus seven broad variants (dialects of Maithili) are: the standard Maithili, the southern, the eastern, the Chikachiki, the western, the Jolahi, the central

[109] Vidyapati is known for his switch to Desil Bana and thus popular not only in the literary circles but also amongst the rural folk. despite being the courly poet (*Darbari Kavi*) he wrote pieces of historical significance. He is the only known poet claimed by people of two linguistic regions Bengal and Mithila and Grierson noted it as unparalleled in the history of literature. He is also known to have influenced the famous Bengali Vaishnav poet, celebrated in Bengal and Assam, Candidasa. Not least, his poetry in praise of lord Shiva, known as Nachari found place of pride in the historical work Ain-i-Akbari.

colloquial. Of these, according to Jha (1958), only three have received distinctive attention: a). Chikachiki of south Bhagalpur, which uses words chika and chiki frequently; b). Jolahi, the language of Mussulmans of Mithila, called so because the majority of Muslim community are Jolaha (weavers); c). Khotta, the language of Malda, spoken as far as the Mahananda river in the east. On the basis of these variants, the places where Maithili is spoken is broadly spread over the districts of Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Purnea, Monghyr, and Bhagalpur. It is also present in mixed forms in the eastern part of Champaran, eastern part of Patna, and northern part of Santal Pargana districts. It is also spoken by the people of the Tarai of Nepla on the border of Bhagalpur and Tirhut divisions, and, non-Bengali residents of Malda and Dinajpur in Bengal. Thus, on the boundaries of Maithili exit languages like Bhojpuri, Bengali, Nepali or Kura, Magahi, and Non-Aryan languages of Santali and Munda. No wonder that Mithila is recognized for abundant speech-marks, which refers to territorial autonomy of language that enables the speakers to operate in diverse registers. The distribution of language is not uniform and thereby in each micro-region the lexical, syntactic and phonetic features may vary. Thus we get an exemplar fusion between Maithili and other languages.

As obvious, any formulation on the historicity of Maithili is not devoid of a reference to the relationship of Maithili with other Indo-Aryan language. Needless to say it as far as Maihtili and Bengali is concerned. The relationship gave birth to a language of poetry in Bengal known as Brajbuli in which even Rabindra Nath Tagore composed. The *Sukumar Sahitya* of Nepal carries bearing of Maithili, and, the medieval Orissa and Assam poetics and drama used Maithili linguistic codes. This is in addition to the relation Maithili has with other languages of Bihar such as Magahi and Bhojpuri. Thus, as Burghart suggest, "an ideal map of the Aryan languages of India would therefore present to the eye a number of colours shading off into each other" (1993: 771).

Even in terms of the scripts of Maithili, the relationship is determinant. Jha (1958) encapsulates some scripts of Maithili: a). The first is the Maithil or *Tirhuta* script that is allied to Bengali and Assamese script, used largely by Brahmanas and Kayashthas; b). The second is *Devnagari*, that is actually of Hindi, has become so widespread that Brahmanas and Kayasthas are exceedingly forgetting the Maithili or Tirhutia; c). Finally, the third is *Kaithi*, resembling the Gujrati script, belongs to the semiliterate and also heavily used in revenue and law-courts in Mithila.

All these, notwithstanding, it is not possible to relegate the autonomy of Maithili. Jha argues, "(so) it is really an independent language and can not be included in either Hindi or Bengali as one of the dialects of either of these, and that on the basis of lexicography only. All these languages being of Aryan origin naturally have in them a predominance of words of Sanskitik stock. Mostly such words are common to Hindi, Maithili and Bengali, though it may well happen that the same word has different meanings in several languages" (Ibid.: 20-21).

The confusion with regard to 'what is real Maithili' spilled through the colonial and post-colonial times as well. Grierson's work on Maithili language discloses it and Burghart captures it in analytical fashion, as he argues, "in 1911 Maithili is Hindi in its wide sense because it is not Bengali; from 1951 Maithili is Hindi in its wide sense because it is important that the national language be the main language in as many regions as possible" (1993: 788). During the company rule, of the early colonial period, poorly understood Maithili (Tirhutia) was thought of as a dialect of Bengali and of eastern Hindi. An accuracy of perception began to emerge with Grierson's linguistic survey, spanning 1903 to 1928. In 1886 Maharaja Lakshmishwar singh (1808-1839), though a minor, ascended to the throne. The lingua franca of upper India gained in currency. This was when Grierson set on considering Maithili as a *Gaonwari Boli* (rustic speech) that intrigued him and his fellows in the courts and administration. An orientalist philologist by training, Grierson focused on Maithili of the literate and mostly Brahmins. As a result, as Burghart notes, "Maithili Pundit's 'chaste Maithili' became the European Philologist's 'standard Maithili'. By implication, the Maithili spoken outside the *Panc kosi* (the micro region of Madhubani) became variant forms, which were classified as 'dialects'" (Ibid.: 775). In the first place, Grierson considered Maithili an independent language because it was mutually unintelligible with Hindi and Bengali. But by the same token of mutual unintelligibility, with Magahi and Bhojpuri, Grierson revised his conclusion and put Maithili as yet another dialect of Bihar. These dialects of Bihar, he thought, belonged to a language group, a philological prototype, which he proposed to be called "Bihari". Criticizing this convenient conclusion Burghart argues, "it seems preposterous that Maithili, Bhojpuri and Magahi speakers could all speak variant of a language, of the existence of what they are unaware" (Ibid.: 778).

The census of 1901 agreed with Grierson on Maithili being a dialect, but of Hindi rather than of an unheard and unseen language 'Bihari'. The ritual decennial census

continued with this clubbing even in post-colonial India as the 1951 census confirms. In the midst of these developments, Maithili became nearly non-existent on the political map of isoglosses[110]. Commenting on this Burghart argues, "in sum, a language can not simply 'not exist'; rather it is made not to exist, and in the techniques of exclusion linguists play as significant a role as their layfolk" (Ibid: 762). Thus, it is important to understand that Maithili-speakers intend to perpetuate the dichotomy of chaste/standard and rustic Maithili as much as the official documents. It establishes the dominance of one kind of Maithili-speakers over the other, paving way for the misconception that Maithil means only those who speak chaste Maithili. Against this, it is imperative to put Burghart's nuanced observation in effect which suggests that the landscape of Mithila, replete in speechmarks rather than landmarks, is resonant with rustic Maihtili which has no less significance. For "It can not be said that rustic Maithili is in any way a simplification of chaste Maithili, for the grammar is equally complex...the difference that emerges is largely one of style as a result of the big and little castes taking different sorts of vocalic and semantic decisions" (Ibid.: 768-69).

Maithili Folklore

It is in this context that Maithili folklore ought to be understood, with the sense of polysemy of the terms such as Mithila, Maithil and Maithili. In the thick of a strong oral tradition, Mithila is replete with folklore, often understood in taxonomic manner (Mishra 1949, Singh 1993, Jha 2002). Of all other, folksongs are central and often part of performance associated with rite of the passage. Maithili folksongs are classified in the layered framework of rites of the passage known as *Samskar Geet*. The category includes songs for birth, Mundan (tonsorial rite), *Upanayan* (sacred-thread giving ceremony), Marriage. Pankaj Jha claims, without detailing, more than one hundred and fifty styles such as *Parati, Sohar, Baagabni, Tirhut, Jog, Uchili,* etc. As an important observation, Ramdev Jha argues that there are songs for the event of death as well, which are often not sung by women[111]. In the song culture of Mithila women have predominant position, though songs associated with folk plays and epics

[110] Bughart refres to Grierson's search of a speech in the south of Punjab which he called 'Junglee', which he never found out because everywhere he went he was told " yes, we know junglee very well, you will find it little further on". The real place and speakers of Junglee were never found out.

[111] Songs of Kabirpanth/ Nirgun are considered songs of death. Anima Singh (1993) mentions three such songs in the end of her compilation of 1012 songs. Other compilations published by local publishers do not mention any death songs.

are generally sung by men (Jha 2002). "The exclusive privilege of women in rendering these songs without any formal training, mainly in terms of creation and recreation of the stories of Sita's marriage, on several occasions, like marriage and other rituals, (which) make the Maithil folksongs distinctive" (Jha 2002: 14). In the same vein, Henry comments on the song culture of the whole of Bihar and distinction of Maithili song culture. The key features reflected in the song-culture are "the monodic singing, some of it in free rhythm, the importance of singing at life cycle and calendric rituals, especially weddings; the dissimilarity of women's and men's songs repertoires; the importance of Ram and Krishna lore; and the presence of lore of other deities including the Hindu goddesses and Shiv". Stressing the significance of women's songs Henry suggests, "But in Mithila the women's songs provide a concrete expressions of tendencies that distinguish Maithili culture from that of other parts of India" (1998: 415). Little wonder, thus, most of the compilations of songs in Maithili are addressed to the women, cutting across various age groups, caste and class. Various collections of songs published by the *Maithili Akadami* (Patna) and others have a direct reference to "Maithil Lalna"[112] (Devi 1980, Anand and Anand 1994, Mishra 2004, Umapati and Mishra 2004) meaning 'Women of Mithila' as the main target readers of these works. Besides there are caste specific folksongs and ballads, such as the Salhesa songs of the Dusadhas, the Deenabhadri of Musahars, the Loric of Yadavas, the Jat-Jatin of Mallahs, etc. All the available compilation of songs begins with 'Gosaunik geet' devoted to the household deity. In fact, on every occasion beginning with a song of genre 'Gosaunik geet' is mandatory.

In his introductory note to the compilation of songs by Smt. Kameshwari Devi, Mohan Bharadwaj writes, "This is an interesting paradox that uncultured songs are rendered on the occasion of the rites which are meant to culture individuals"[113] (1980: g). This paradox accords superiority to women as they execute '*Lokpakshiya kriya*' (folk activities) of the rites. The *Lokpakshiya* is not less important than the

---

[112] In the editorial words, Ratneshwar Prasad Singh addresses 'Maithil Lalna' which means women of Mithila as a target group of this compilation. This book consists of songs recollected by Smt. Kameshwari Devi (1980) who learnt these songs from her grandmother during her childhood. Herself an illiterate, the collector of these songs aspired to get her collection printed so that it could be preserved as literate women are exceedingly forgetting these songs. The book consists of songs sung on various occasions of rite the passage.

[113] Mohan Jha, in Kameshwari Devi(1980) says, "*Ee ekta adbhut virodhabhasi sthiti aichh je manushya ka susanskrit karaywala anushthanak awsar par asanskrit geet gaol jayet achhi*". Here '*Asanskrit geet*' refers to the folk songs in contrast with the classical songs.

'Dhrmapakshiya' (religious aspects), which are executed by the pundits in rites and rituals. The songs, which constitute the Lokpakshiya, are equivalent to the hymns and mantras chanted in the *Dhrmapakshiya.*

It is noteworthy in this regard that Maithil scholars connect Maithili songs with *Saam gaan* (songs/hymns form the Saam Veda) (Henry 1998, Jha 2002). Henry goes on to suggest that the Vedic style of singing is retained largely Srotriya Brahman women as they have been repository of the Vedic knowledge. Also that, Maithili songs demonstrate a manifold interface between classical and folk. One is clearly explicit in the way any history of Maithili literature uses the nomenclature and categories of songs as though they belonged to the literate tradition. Ramdev jha (2002) decries this as trivialization of folksongs. Secondly, there are so many songs with the names of poets inserted at the end, such as Vidyapati's name. They are all, however not written by Vidyapati. Jaykant Mishra argues, "the insertion of the poet's name (or any name he chooses whether *nom de plume* of himself or the name of the guru) appears to have been practiced in the old and the medieval periods through out the length and breath of upper India" (1949" 77). But then, this should not rule out the possibility of classical poetry transfomred into folksongs as there are evidences of women singing vidyapati's Gosaunik songs (songs in devotion to mother goddess).

An acknowledgment of women's prominent position in the song culture of Mithila also discloses the problem of academic-scholarly approach to the treasure of songs, which often amount to mere classification of songs. Henry points it out by noting, "Women most often classify wedding songs according to the name of the ritual or ritual stage in which they will be sung, but some times according to the ritual alluded or referred to by the song text. Classification is thus not watertight, and singers occasionally disagree about the genre to which a certain song belongs, or create hyphenated categories on an ad hoc basis" (1998: 418). Thus, it ought to be always kept in recognition that classification, to which most of the approaches resort, does not suffice the purpose of understanding the text and context of the songs.

Moreover, women's songs also divulge treasure of meanings. Especially certain categories are pregnant with philosophical meanings, such as Samdaun and Sohar. In them, "the poetry is more literary, and the message more philosophical than that of

most women's songs" (Henry 2000: 88)[114]. Maithili songs are replete with mythological icons and the protagonist of a song, often, is called after a god or a deity. It is same in Samdaun songs too which are sung while bidding farewell to daughter after her marriage. Henry interestingly draws a parallel between death and the farewell given to a daughter who is leaving for her in-laws' home. No wonder then "the removal of bride is a metaphor for death in many songs, the nirguna bhajans in particular" (1998: 427).

Henry points the dialogic structure of devotional folksongs in which benevolent as well as malevolent mother goddess is praised. But, the same structure can be spotted in many other songs too. And the depth of meaning which Henry perceives in Samdaun songs can be unearthed in other categories as well. Songs of everyday life, especially *Parati* (meant to be sung in the morning (without any special occasion) by individual singers in the space of household), includes songs of Nirgun kind and they are extremely philosophical in terms of meaning.

Conclusion

The objective of the discourse in this chapter is met by describing and establishing the historical emergence of polysemy of the terms such as Mithila, Maithil and Maithili. The reason why it is so important in the context of this research is that it is an enabling intellectual leverage to sort out the modern myths that often emerge from over-glorification of a cultural region. While it acknowledges the historicity, with conjectural attempts, is in perpetual interaction with myth (modern as well as traditional), it is also to contextualize the research in the field in entirety.

[114] Edward O. Henry's two works, Maithili women's songs: Distinctive and Endangered Species (1998) and Folksong genres and their Melodies (2000) are referred to in this chapter. Both are concerned with the performance of songs and the inherent musicological structure of the selected songs. I am using Henry arguments only selectively. The musicological findings of Henry suggest that there is a distinct sonic characteristic of Maithili folksongs of women, with unique melismatic surge, melodic style, unregulated unison of singers in the performance. Also, the thesis of Grierson , and concurring thesis of Susan Wadley, that there is largely singularity of melody in each genre is refuted by Henry.